

CHAPTER 3:

THE HISTORY OF BILTMORE VILLAGE

Fold out maps have been incorporated to enhance your understanding and to make comparative studies of present and future conditions more convenient.

Unfold maps in chapters 1, 4 and 10 before proceeding further into text.

Please contact Historic Resources Commission staff at
(828) 259-5836 or (828) 259-5638 for a copy of the maps

THE HISTORY OF BILTMORE VILLAGE

As early as 1784, settlers built in the delta along the banks of the Swannanoa in the area known today as Biltmore Village. This community known as the Swannanoa Settlement grew into a town center. However, by 1840, the town center and its primary retail establishments moved to the area now known as Pack Square. The community left behind was commonly known as the Town of Best or Asheville Junction.

By 1881 the Village could boast of the first train station in the Asheville area. This community also had a grist mill, a post office, an ice house, and several small commercial establishments.

By the mid-1880's and the arrival of George W. Vanderbilt, the small town of Best was destined to become something greater. In 1888 Mr. Vanderbilt's land agent, Charles McNamee, had purchased the first of many parcels from Samuel Reed to amass the 125,000 acres he desired to create the finest country estate and village in America.

From the profits of these sales, Samuel Reed built a fine Queen Anne residence overlooking the unique planned village which Vanderbilt would build below. Restored as a bed & breakfast, the Reed House still stands above Biltmore Village today and is recognized as a Local Historic Landmark.

Once Vanderbilt had procured the land he required, he engaged Richard Morris Hunt (1827-1895) as the architect. Hunt studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and brought with him that school's affinity for classical French design. Hunt's career also included the design of many New York City landmarks, including the base to the Statue of Liberty. He founded the American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.) and served as its president.

In laying out the estate grounds, Mr. Vanderbilt engaged Fredric Law Olmsted (1822-1903). The designer of Central Park in New York, Olmsted is acknowledged as the father of landscape architecture in this county. He was a pioneer of numerous state and national parks and designed many prominent university grounds in America. Just before accepting his commission with Vanderbilt, Olmsted worked on the design of Shelburne Farms, the country home of George Vanderbilt's sister Lila and her husband William Seward Webb. The Shelburne Farms idea preceded the idea of Biltmore and had picturesque cottages and buildings. Nearby, the Smith McDowell

The classic French design of the Biltmore House created an opportunity for a European style village at its gate.

museum in Asheville also had its grounds designed by the Olmsted firm.

Hunt collaborated with Olmsted on the design of Biltmore Village. During the construction of Biltmore House and the design of Biltmore Village, Richard Sharpe Smith (1852-1924), a former employee of Bradford Gilbert whose firm designed the Manor Inn in Asheville, came to work with Hunt. After Hunt's death in 1895, Smith, according to his own advertisement, served for six years as George Vanderbilt's "resident architect" where he continued to contribute wonderful architectural designs to the masterful collaboration between Hunt and Olmsted.

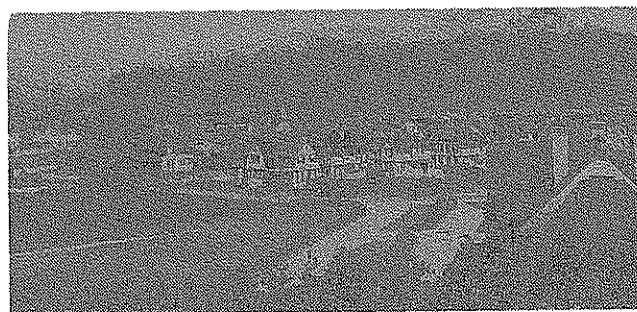


Biltmore Village 1915

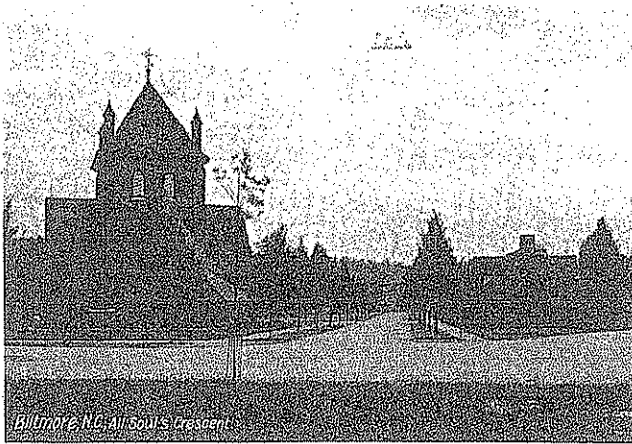
The streets of Biltmore Village were laid out in a fan shape with All Souls Church at the pivot point. Opposite the church, Biltmore Plaza was laid out in a tapered shape so that passengers arriving on the train had an exaggerated perspective view of the church. This central axis and plaza was the focus for Biltmore Village.

Kathy Traugher writes in her Biltmore Village Historic Museum pamphlet:

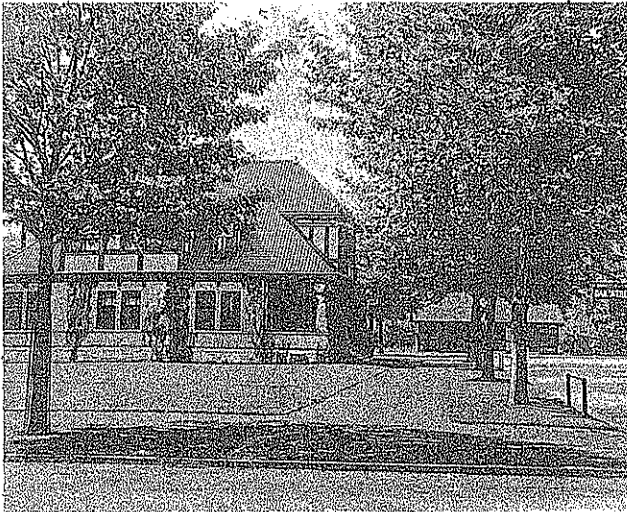
From its auspicious beginnings in 1889, the Village grew at a fast pace. In 1896, the year after the estate opened, the roads, church, parish house, rectory, estate office, and depot had been designed by Hunt and completed. By 1901, twelve cottages designed by Smith had been built and rented. They proved so popular due to the modern conveniences of steam heat, baths, louvered blinds, and beautifully maintained landscaping that Vanderbilt gave orders for twelve to fifteen more.



Biltmore Village as viewed from the Southeast



All Souls Church and the school before Swann Street was closed and the buildings connected.



The Biltmore Estate offices on Biltmore Plaza. Note the office building in the background, this building became the first office for the Biltmore-Oteen Bank. It is now the Biltmore Shoe Shop.

House Beautiful Magazine describes "The Millionaire's Village" in their August 1903 article as "an ideal Village in the hills of North Carolina, designed as a whole and built to order..."

The Village lies in a basin encircled by wooded hills. The church forms the center, and from it radiate smooth roads bordered with turf and trees, along which the cottages stand, vine-covered, each in its own little garden. As the streets diverge from the church, so all the beneficent work in this ideal little place starts from the same source, for the rector has charge of all the many good works here carried out. At one side stands the well-appointed school-house in its roomy playground. There the children throng, and it is most encouraging to know that from silent, shy, uncouth little creatures they soon become responsive, wide-awake, courteous boys and girls. The building, with all its furnishings, is the gift of the owner of this village, and his lovely wife has taken the warmest interest in the interior. Beautiful pictures, casts of statues, and maps cover the walls and fill the eye of the beholder.

For a mere song all this is in the reach of any child, and many persons interested to help on the good work give scholarships to little ones whose parents cannot afford the very small tuition fee.

The primary object in establishing the school was to give an education to the children of the employees on the adjoining estate, but the tuition is so excellent that pupils come from the country around as well as the neighboring townships and number now about one hundred and ten.

The hospital, which is near the school, is being enlarged; a proof that it, too, fulfills its destiny. There is also a large, well-appointed building for lectures, meetings for parish work and Sunday school. Wood-carving has interested the boys very much and they are doing some good work under the direction of skilful and enthusiastic teachers; basket-making is also well taught.

Passing down the center of this little town, with its pebble-dashed walls and tiled roofs, one comes to the wide plaza, flanked on one side by a long, picturesque building, containing the shops below and suites of apartments above; on the opposite side of the plaza stands an ivy-covered building with broad piazza and portecochere. In this is carried on all the clerical work connected with the many industries on the estate which adjoins and supports the village.

Leaving behind the pretty post-office and railroad depot, the tennis-court, and cricket ground, with turflike velvet, one drives under a beautiful arch which connects the two wings of the porter's lodge and enters something between park and garden.

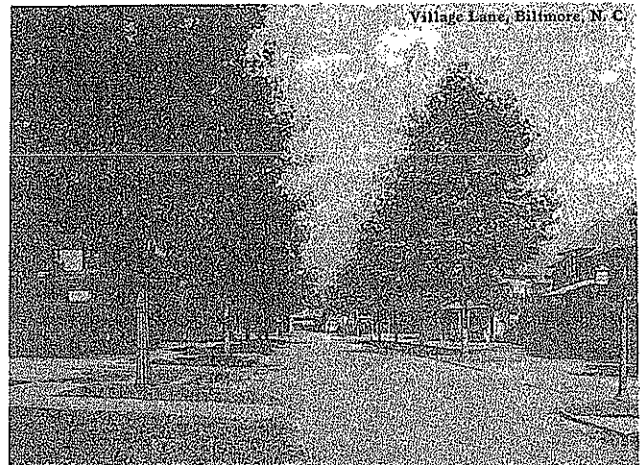
As a scholar, Vanderbilt was determined to create an entire experience. It was not only a goal of his to develop a support community for the estate, but also to develop a process as well. Biltmore Village provided the aesthetic and social context for the entrance to his estate. It was also an interface between him and his peers. His church was there, his train station, his school and his hospital—all philanthropically created and supported to grow and blossom.

By 1908 most of the public buildings were complete in Biltmore Village. Most of the larger homes also completed had central heating and electricity produced by Vanderbilt's own coal-burning power plant and serviced with underground service drops. The grounds were maintained by the Biltmore Estate gardeners. It was at that time that the smaller cottages without central heating were built.

The September 1909 issue of Ladies World Magazine describes Biltmore Village and its smaller affordable tenant cottages...

There is Biltmore Village. Strolling along its highways it is easy to think you are in England, with the lanthorns at the corners of the "roads" and "lanes" instead of streets and avenues, the very English design of church, with its chimes and service, which is really Anglican rather than Episcopal, the cottages of rural Britain with even their roses and vines. In Biltmore Village are the shops where the Vanderbilt colony trade, the post-office and the offices of the Vanderbilt estate. In the houses dwell these folk, the tradespeople and some Northerners who come here to enjoy the winter climate. Biltmore Village has no saloon, no newspaper.

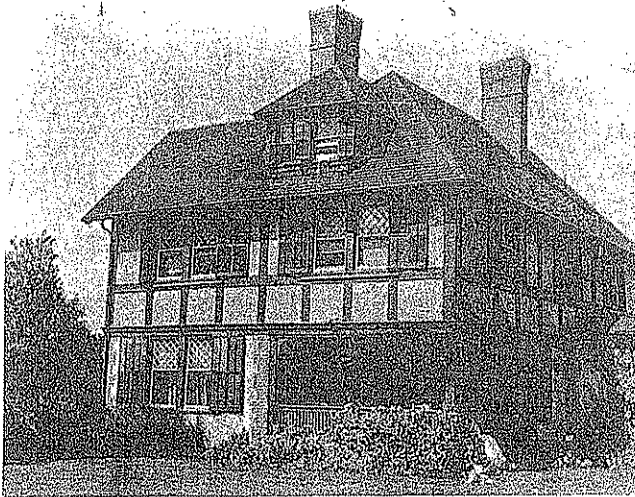
Three other little communities besides Biltmore Village are tucked away in quiet corners—the homes of the tenants who work in the fields, the herders, and the foresters. While the Village is the most "cityfied," every dwelling in them all was built or rebuilt especially for homes to be healthful and comfortable, and to cost as little as possible, so they could be rented at a low price. The builders dug sand and gravel from the riverbeds, and mixing this with cement, they plastered a framework of wire stretched on wood.



The cottages shown on the right in this historic post card were located in the block where the Heavenly Ham store and the ABC store are located today.



This historic postcard shows the rectory on the left and the original home built on the site of BB&T on the right.



This large residence stood on the southeast corner of Boston Way and Biltmore Avenue (see photo below). Note the transitional style in regard to the public buildings in the cottages. There are no remaining residential structures standing in Biltmore Village today with brick quoins.



All Souls Church with The Village and the Kennilworth Inn beyond – 1904.

And not only the homes but the block of shops, the office buildings, the pretty hospital, even most of the church, are composed of this homemade concrete, and were erected years before the general use of it was thought of. The same material forms the barns, dairies and other farm buildings. So it is that not only do you find a nook of old England in Biltmore Village, but miles away from it you come upon other groups of cottages with their shrub and flower-decked yards and bit of a garden in the rear—each has its half dozen or more rooms, its heating and cooking stoves, sewer and pure water, yet the tenant pays only four or five dollars a month, according to the size of the house which he occupies.

Before George Vanderbilt died in 1914, he must have been very proud of the village he had created—a seed he planted and nourished for the people outside his gates. Ms. Traugher goes on to describe Biltmore Village...

In 1911, most of the village's 250 residents still worked on the estate, and the village had grown to include a school, hospital, post office, and one of the country's first neighborhood shopping centers. It was a two-story brick building in the traditional English design on the central plaza. The upper story consisted of flats while the street level contained eight shops, including a meat market, a drugstore, a dry goods store, and various offices.

The focal point of the village, both architecturally and socially, was the Romanesque-style church of All Souls Parish. To be such an imposing and extraordinarily complicated structure outside, the church was actually quite simple and unexpectedly small inside, seating only 160. It was designed in the shape of a Greek cross with a massive central tower. The furnishings were unpretentious and simple, though of the best quality. The memorial windows were manufactured by a friend of Hunt's, Maitland Armstrong, and made of opalescent glass using a pre-Gothic method which produced amazing richness and depth of color.

At the turn of the century, it was not unusual for a man to build his own church, and in this case, it was the gift of a man inspired by high spiritual motives. George Vanderbilt served as first Senior Warden of the parish, and agreed to pay all salaries and church expenses, which he did until his death. With no budget or mortgage worries, the church immediately set about the task of

becoming the spiritual heart of the community. The first rector, Dr. Rodney Rush Swope, led the church in meeting human needs and serving as the village's chief social agent.

Vanderbilt sought out the best organist, Carlyl Florio, whom he recognized to be a musical genius. Together with F. Flaxington Harker of England, who followed him in 1902 and created a wonderful children's choir, that created a lasting reputation for fine music at the church.

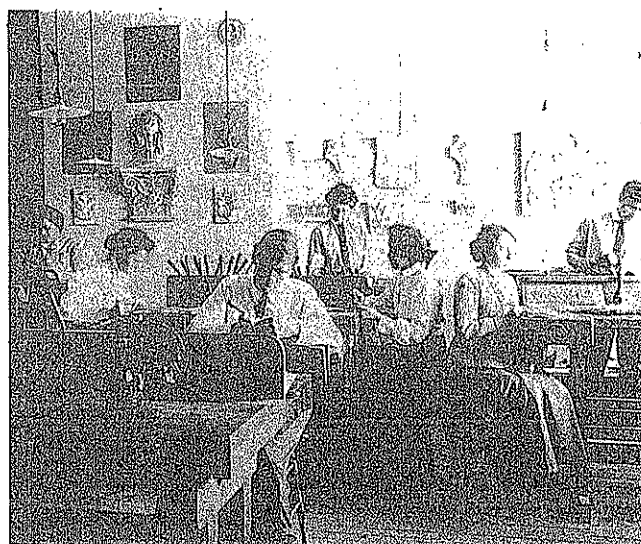
The Clarence Barker Memorial Hospital and Dispensary was built as a memorial to a cousin of Vanderbilt's and as an arm of the church. Originally built for minor care for ten patients, it was soon enlarged by the addition of a fine operating room. In 1909, it became an independent organization known as the Biltmore Hospital. One former resident of the village recalled that it was "light and airy, and the beds were not too close together."

To meet educational needs, the church began a school as one of its first functions. In the Vanderbilt tradition of executing every idea with the best men and materials, the school rooms were attractive and well equipped. Fine art reproductions were displayed, and the most advanced teaching methods were employed. Teachers considered each student to have a valuable opinion and allowed great freedom of expression in class. The children published their own uncorrected newspaper twice a year. In 1909, this school gave way to a larger one outside the bounds of the village. In education, as in all its activities, the church's role was to meet a need and then quietly let go of it whenever the community could assume control.

Two ladies of All Souls began clubs for the young people of the village, encouraging their use of the traditional skills of their Scotch-English ancestors. The mountain people had been weavers and woodworkers for generations and still used crude methods and materials, but their results were of exceptional quality. In 1905, Mrs. Vanderbilt established Biltmore Industries to keep these skills alive. A cottage industry was developed and private orders filled. Although some work was done in office space in the village, most was done in homes all over the estate. All products were stamped with an insignia—the word "Forward" on a scroll pierced with an arrow. In 1917, the business had outgrown its village quarters and was sold to the Grove Park Inn where it



The original Clarence Barker Hospital – before it burned.



Students working at the Biltmore Industries location on Biltmore Plaza.

continued to prosper.

Several things happened rather quickly to bring permanent changes to the life and look of the Village. When Vanderbilt died unexpectedly in 1914, most of the estate was sold. Then in 1916 the Swannanoa River flooded; several people drowned and there was considerable damage to village buildings. Four years later, Mrs. Vanderbilt sold most of the village. She tried to protect the integrity of the town by including incredible deed restrictions in the sale, but these were never enforced. Although the original beauty was seriously damaged by another flood in 1926, renovation of the remaining cottages into specialty shops in more recent years has been a positive force in maintaining some of the ambience of the original Biltmore Village.



This photograph from the flood of 1926 shows the Biltmore Hardware building in the center. Note the beautifully designed service stations on the lot of McDonald's (Gulf) and the corner of Lodge and Biltmore Avenue.

For a brief time in Asheville history, the Vanderbilts tried to transplant a grand way of life here, a seed that briefly flourished outside the estate gates. As you stand at the apex of the fanlike street pattern and look at the amazingly quaint remnants of this village, picture the once-idyllic setting and capture for a moment, the excitement and grand design of "The Project."

When Biltmore Village merchants Robert Gray and William Bell began developing their shops in Biltmore Village in the 1960's, it must have been those same visions that motivated the merchants to build their businesses. Local banks and doctors followed. Since 1979 eight major businesses have opened successful stores in Biltmore Village. Approximately five million dollars of new construction and renovation projects have occurred in Biltmore Village in the last 20 years. Mr. Vanderbilt's "Project" is now in its renaissance.